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Polygyny, Concubinage, and the Social Lives of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia

Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard

Introduction: (Un)tangling Viking-Age Social Relations

Some two decades ago, Stavanger Museum in Norway launched an exhibition on *Den sterke kvinnen*, 'The Powerful Woman', which presented an explicitly female prehistory of Scandinavia from the Bronze Age to the Viking period. In the galleries and accompanying publication (Lundström & Adolfsson 1995, 5) the message was clear, set out in the introduction formatted as a poem: 'This is the story of the powerful woman | and her journey through history, | from the earliest times | till Christianity takes hold. | From equality to subjection'. While criticized by some as overly reductionist (e.g. *Svenska Dagbladet* 6–11.4.97), this

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Abstract: In this paper we utilize evolutionary theory, anthropological data, and historical sources to explore how marriage practices shaped social behaviours and attitudes towards gender in Viking-Age Scandinavia. We focus primarily on the normative practices of polygyny and concubinage, which have been shown by anthropological studies to legitimize behaviours that reinforce male power. Our survey found that many of these behaviours might have been prevalent among Viking-Age societies. These include competition among men seeking to gain access to the marriage market, female seclusion, and the bartering of women in marriage contracts. Inside the household, these practices may have precipitated an increased risk of domestic violence, the neglect of children, and the male domination of household decisions. However, we also identify a number of significant ways in which male power was contested and subverted by women's agency, both within the home and in the context of wider society.

Keywords: Viking Age, women, children, polygyny, concubinage, marriage, operational sex ratios, gender, violence, power, conflict

outlook was symptomatic of two trends in mid-90s archaeology: a now-familiar tendency to simply 'add women and stir' as an early approach to engendering the past, and a promotion of the stereotypical 'Viking woman' as enjoying a markedly greater degree of independence and social power than her sisters in neighbouring cultures and later, Christian times.

In reality, of course, both sexes saw out their days at every level of the social scale, from rulers to slaves and all points in between: there was no more a typical 'Viking woman' than there was a typical 'Viking man'. It is also abundantly clear that the spectrum of gendered identities extended very much further than biological sex, and with varying degrees of social sanction (e.g. Sørensen 1983; Solli 1999, 2002; Price 2002; Back Danielsson 2007; Bragg 2008; Arwill-Nordbladh 2012); while this is not our focus here, it should be borne in mind as context for the discussion that follows.

The literature on Viking-Age women has expanded rapidly, and is now engaging with their lived experiences in ever-more subtle ways. It spans a range from early general surveys (e.g. Jesch 1991, Jochens 1995) and gendered deconstructions of the female image (e.g. Jochens 1996, Arwill-Nordbladh 1998, Göransson 1999) to more specific reviews of women's many roles in the mythologies (e.g. Simek & Heizmann 2002) and saga literature (e.g. Anderson & Swenson 2002). More recently, archaeological studies have explored female agency as articulated through gendered activities such as weaving (e.g. Norrman 2008) and an entangled variety of other transformative domestic tasks, often with ritual overtones (e.g. Price 2002, Gardeła 2012), in architecture (e.g. Eriksen 2015), and in landscapes (e.g. Moen 2011), to name but a few, as well as across traditional gender boundaries (for example, women as traders: Stalsberg 1991). More detailed examples are explored below, but it is notable that the latest, bench-marking collection of studies on Viking-Age women (Coleman & Løkka 2014) is encouragingly multi-disciplinary and spans a very broad range of female lives indeed — as seen in rural and urban environments, in the law courts and in towns, in the roles of heiresses, sorceresses, and saga heroines, in clothing and personal names, and in contexts of cultural interchange — all with appropriately fluid boundaries between pluralistic identities that were anything but static.

Despite this wealth of research touched on above, however, archaeological approaches to gender can be worryingly categorical (Joyce 2008), and the 'powerful woman' of the Viking Age is *still* frequently upheld as a monolithic role model of emancipation. Belief in the 'Lady of the Keys' or the 'Mistress of the Hall' lives on not only in popular perception but also in academic literature and museums (as deconstructed by Hauptman 2014, Kolker 2014, Pantmann 2014). This image is not totally without validity, as we discuss below, but at best it can be

applied to only a small proportion of Viking-Age women and requires substantial qualification and nuance. Furthermore, it is important to note that when these women are described as having been 'just as powerful' as their normatively high-status male counterparts, this risks merely confirming the hegemonic role that men have been — and to an extent continue to be — allowed to play in our efforts to understand the period. At another level, the notion of power — in the home and on the farm, at the *þing*, in politics, and to some extent on the battlefield — has dominated the discourse on Viking-Age gender roles and identities, in a manner that somehow tends to avoid the issues of more immediate interpersonal relationships. These are naturally implicated in negotiations of power and control, but can also have wider impacts.

In this light, we attempt here a critical re-reading of female lives in Viking-Age Scandinavia[1] through the study of marriage practices and sexual relations. Our study is unusual in that it represents a collaboration between two archaeologists specializing in the Viking period (BR and NP) and an evolutionary anthropologist (MC). Situating our research at the intersection between the humanities and sciences in this way may at first seem controversial. For those working in the humanities, evolutionary anthropology is sometimes seen as overly reductionist, privileging data in isolation from its social context. Conversely, to evolutionary scientists, the humanities can seem like nothing more than unrestrained speculation far beyond any connection between evidence and its testable interpretation. We believe, however, that there are great benefits to integrating these perspectives into the study of past societies. It is vital not only to understand how cultural choices and inheritances are influenced by longer-term evolutionary trajectories but also how studies of human behaviour as it manifested in the past can play an important role in shedding light on and nuancing the results of scientific research.

This paper is in some ways one of a pair; the other was published earlier in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior* (Raffield and others 2017). We employ a broad spectrum of evidence to ask whether two normative practices — polygyny and concubinage — were present in Viking-Age Scandinavia. Concluding that this was in fact the case, we then use a variety of cross-cultural, comparative anthropological data to examine how such practices have played out in different contexts, in particular relating to their effects on the operational sex ratio and the

[1] By this term we mean the broad cultural sphere of the Scandinavian peoples, centring on the homelands of what are now the Nordic countries but also expanding across the diaspora, during the period *c.* 750–1050 CE.

varying consequences thereof. In essence, the two papers discuss these practices among Scandinavian societies from differing perspectives: in the *Evolution and Human Behavior* paper (Raffield and others 2017) we considered what this might have meant for men, while in the present paper we address their impact on women.

Deliberately selective and focused, this paper does not pretend to present a universalizing model of gender in this time and place but instead aims to illuminate specific aspects of social relations and personal interaction. In particular we explore the customs and rules by which these behaviours were constrained, or which they subverted, and the wide-ranging consequences that we suggest they may have had for the historical trajectory of late Iron-Age Scandinavia.[2]

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the epistemological framework of the paper. Rather than being a study in which Viking-Age archaeology and later textual sources are compared with anthropological data, we are instead, as in our 2017 paper, employing evolutionary theory and ethnographic evidence to generate predictions, which we then test with the material and literary records. As other aspects of our research have shown (Raffield and others 2016, 2017), the incorporation of evolutionary concepts into the study of the Viking Age can shed light on contemporaneous social attitudes and practices that are otherwise difficult to explore through traditional methods of archaeological and historical enquiry. Importantly, our 'prediction testing' approach does not involve forcing the archaeological and literary evidence to fit a pattern. We are as interested in instances where the predictions are not met as we are in the cases where the predictions are fulfilled.

Our paper is structured as follows. Following an overview of the evidence for polygyny and concubinage in Viking-Age Scandinavia, we examine the links between these practices and operational sex ratios. We then consider how these practices might have influenced social behaviours within Viking-Age societies. We focus initially on strategies employed by men to secure marriage partners and concubines, as well as those that enabled them to dominate matters of family diplomacy and marriage, including the seclusion of women, arranged marriage, and brideprice. We then examine gender roles in Viking-Age Scandinavia, before proceeding to consider how these would have affected intra-household relationships, policy, and conflict. Thereafter, we reflect on the results of our study in light of past scholarship concerning Viking-Age women, before offering some final remarks.

[2] By 'late Iron Age' we mean the period *c.* 400–1050 CE.

Marriage Practices and Sexual Relationships in Viking-Age Scandinavia

During the Viking Age in Scandinavia, both marriage unions and more informal relationships represented a means by which family structures, identities, and both social and political hierarchies were formed and adapted. A favourable marriage, for example, was not only essential to securing the social and political status of individuals and their kin but also, in some cases, to ensuring survival during times of conflict (Jochens 1995, 28–29). For the elite, both marriage and concubinage represented political tools that were used to construct networks of obligation and allegiance, allowing high-status families to maintain their dominance of social hierarchies.

A range of evidence indicates that Viking-Age Scandinavian societies practised both polygyny, meaning that men could take multiple wives, and concubinage — a semi-formal relationship in which men and women engage in sexual activity and sometimes cohabit without marrying. These practices could be simultaneous (i.e. a man could have both one or more wives *and* one or more concubines) but are distinct from one another and will be treated as such below. In the context of our larger argument, though, they have similar effects. Evolutionary theory and cross-cultural ethnographic data suggest that this combination of male-female relationships could have had a number of repercussions for gender roles, socio-political relationships, and power. We have previously discussed aspects of these practices, concerning their potential role in precipitating the first Viking raids (Raffield and others 2017), and thus only briefly review the evidence and its limitations here. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to emphasize that Viking-Age Scandinavians were not exceptional in engaging in polygyny and concubinage; it is estimated that 85 per cent of societies in the anthropological record have practised some degree of polygyny, and many societies around the world continue to do so today (see White 1988, Zeitzen 2008, Henrich and others 2012a).

Identifying marriage and sexual practices in the archaeological record is not an easy task, given that any evidence is inevitably ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Developing a sufficiently nuanced approach to Viking-Age gender relationships therefore presents many challenges. To take dramatic examples, we can briefly turn to the cemeteries of the southern Rūs area (Androshchuk & Zotsenko 2012). The extent to which the Rūs represented an expansion of Scandinavian culture has long been debated (e.g. Franklin & Shepard 1996, Duczko 2004) and it is clear that they were an eclectic ethnic mix that cannot be straightforwardly seen as 'eastern Vikings' (Hraundal 2013, 2014). On the

other hand, it is equally clear that Scandinavians played a very considerable, even dominant, role in the material construction of Rūs power and identity (Androshchuk 2013). Several tenth-century Rūs burials with clear Scandinavian material components contain double interments of a man and woman together. Their body positions are hard to interpret but suggest an intimate relationship between the people in life, and moreover one that was deliberately signalled. In the Shestovytsya grave-field near Chernihov, for example, chamber grave 36 contains a man with his left arm around the shoulders of a woman laid out beside him (Duczko 2004, 244; Blifeld 1977, 168–69; fig. 10), both dressed in eastern fashion. At Podgortsy near L'viv, a man with Scandinavian weaponry is buried linking arms with a woman, while in another grave from the same cemetery a couple hold hands (Liwoch 2007, 368–71, graves 1 and 2; fig. 11). In several cases the women are substantially smaller than the men, perhaps teenage girls (for full descriptions of the burials, see Androshchuk & Zotsenko 2012, 169–73, 185). Are these gestures of affection, of possessive control or literal ownership, of intimacy or coercion, or indeed of still other relationships? The only clarity may be found in definition: these funerary arrangements were intentional and intended to convey *something*. We know of no excavated graves that would unequivocally demonstrate a polygynous or concubine relationship between the buried dead, but it is hard to imagine exactly what this would look like, nor how these differences in status would be manifested.

A few burials do contain a single man and more than one woman, often laid out in ways that spatially distinguish their associations. One example is grave Ka.294–97 at Kaupang in Norway, an early tenth-century boat burial containing four individuals (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995; Stylegar 2007, 95–100, 122–23; fig. 12). In the prow lay a man and a woman, positioned head to head so that the woman's feet pointed towards the stem while the man's were oriented to the stern. The body of a baby was bundled at the woman's hip, her hand resting on its head. A second woman had been placed sitting up in the stern, probably with the steering oar of the boat in her arms. The artefacts, animals, and other aspects of the burial have been treated in detail in an earlier paper (Price 2010) but we can ask here how the relationships between the human dead could be interpreted. A bond between the first woman and the child is surely feasible, but what about the man? Are the two adults in the prow a 'couple', in any sense? Why not lay them out side by side? And how does the woman in the stern relate to either of them? One might also ask how these four individuals all came to die at the same time (perhaps through illness?) and whether some were killed to accompany others — again, a circumstance that might imply status differences between them.

Figure 10. Chamber grave 36 from the Shestovytsya cemetery near Chernihov, Ukraine, dating to the tenth century CE. The double burial of a man and a woman contains numerous artefacts of Scandinavian origin, typical of the Rūs hybrid culture. Reconstruction by Vera Olsson, following the original excavation plan (Blifeld 1977) and in consultation with Fedir Androshchuk. This image is reproduced in colour on p. 120.

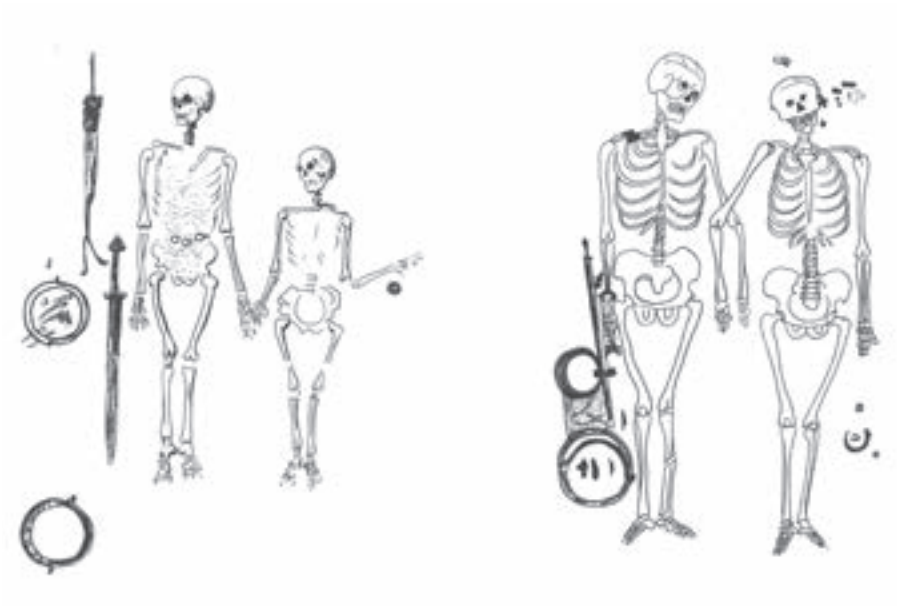

Figure 11. Two double burials from the Rūs culture, at the Podgortsy cemetery near L'viv, Ukraine, dating to the tenth century CE; graves 1 (left) and 2 (right). Both contain the bodies of a man and woman and the weapons are of Scandinavian origin. Note that these are inked up from the rough field sketches of the 1880s, and the grave contents were not recorded to relative scale. After Livoch 2007.

There is one particular category of archaeological evidence that clearly preserves detailed records of family structure, namely the runestone inscriptions of central Sweden. We might expect them to shed light on issues of polygynous relationships, but this is not generally the case. Gräslund (1989, 1995) has conducted extensive studies of women mentioned on the stones of Uppland province, some 959 inscriptions, but in her opinion not a single one seems to describe a man with two or more wives at the same time (though several include widowers who have remarried). On the face of it this would seem to be a fairly conclusive indication that at least the men of Uppland were not polygynous, but there are several factors that militate against this. First, it is clear that polygynous marriages almost always have internal hierarchies of relative status between the wives, and it is by no means certain that anyone more than the 'first wife' would be named in inscriptions that often have to do with inheritance and land claims. Second and most important, the Uppland stones are almost all from the eleventh century at the end of the Viking Age, and they usually have a clear

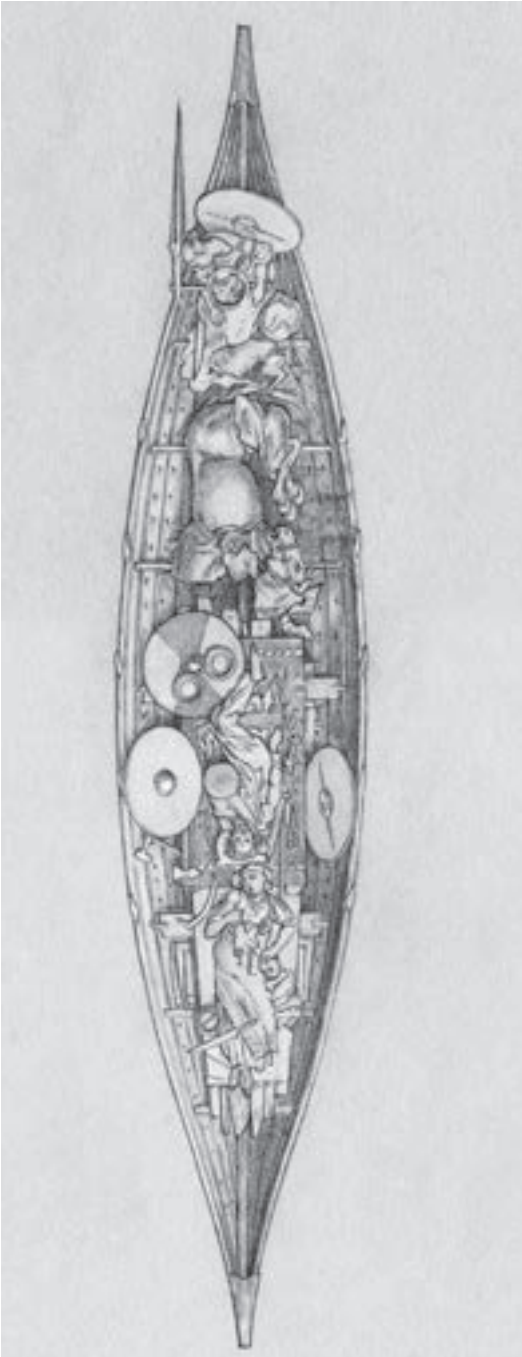

Figure 12.
Graves Ka.294–97 from Kaupang in Norway, dating to the early tenth century CE. The boat contains the bodies of two women, a man, and an infant. The vessel had been deliberately interred on top of an earlier, male burial, its keel exactly aligned along the axis of the previous grave. Reconstruction by Þórhallur Þráinsson. This image is reproduced in colour on p. 121.

Figure 13. Runestone Sö 297 from Uppinge in Södermanland, Sweden. The inscription reads, '*Amoða ok Moða letu læggia stæin þenna at Sigræif, bonda sinn, ok broður Sigstæins ok Holmstæins*' (Amoða and Moða had this stone laid to Sigræif, their husband, and Sigstæin's and Holmstæin's brother). The similarity in the women's names perhaps implies that they were related. Photo by Helen Simonsson, Wikimedia Commons. This image is reproduced in colour on p. 122.

Christian context. Given the Church's outspoken and legally enshrined rejection of polygyny and concubinage, it would actually be surprising if the stones *did* mention such relationships.

In a study of runestone design schemes as integral parts of the message conveyed, Andrén (2000, 23–24) has taken a different tack, albeit focusing on an exception rather than the rule. He notes two stones, one from Uppinge in Södermanland (Sö 297) and a second from Bräcksta in Uppland (U 1039), that he claims both mention two women with the same husband. Though he admits that some runologists favour alternative interpretations, Andrén sees this as clear evidence for polygynous marriages, which he suggests would also explain the large numbers of half-siblings mentioned in the general run of inscriptions. He further notes how the central Swedish stones were often commissioned by many individuals, contrasting with the stones of southern Scandinavia which usually have just a single sponsor, and suggests this may reflect differing marriage customs between the regions with potentially detectible signals in the cemeteries (Andrén 2000, 24).

In view of these archaeological problems, the majority of the evidence for polygyny and concubinage in Viking-Age Scandinavia must be extrapolated from written sources. There are of course considerable source-critical problems in the activation of Old Norse prose and poetry for the study of the Viking Age that they claim to describe. The basic positions and pendulum swings of opinion are well known, and documented across shelf metres of literature (summarized in Clunies Ross 1994, 1998, 2010; O'Donoghue 2004; McTurk 2005; Larrington and others 2016), and we also refer readers to the online publications of the *Retrospective Methods Network* devoted to these issues. We see no need to rehearse these debates again, but what some might dismiss as a 'token source-critical caveat' is in fact a necessary prelude to what can be a remarkably productive engagement with the later texts, in full awareness of their limitations but also of their potential. In fact, many literary scholars use these sources in precisely that way — and often with great success. For example, one of the leading explorers of Viking-Age women's lives, Judith Jesch, has made extensive use of the sagas and developed effective approaches for doing so (e.g. Jesch 1991, 2015).

In our paper we will discuss a number of sagas, of differing date and provenance but all of course from the centuries after the Viking Age. What we take from them is not literal reflections of pagan social practice but consistent patterns of description over time, set in the context of what medieval Christians evidently found believable about their pre-Christian ancestors (Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001 provides an extensive review of this material). Of particular relevance is the correlation between these later sources and the proscriptions of the first recorded law codes, themselves also medieval but arguably based in part on much

earlier legal concepts. If an act needs to be expressly forbidden, then one may be reasonably sure that people are doing it. Moreover, in the case of institutions such as concubinage and polygyny it is hard to argue that these were *innovations* of the monogamous Christian society for whom the laws were shaped rather than continuities of pre-existing custom. When one additionally considers the unambiguous eyewitness descriptions of these practices in the contemporary accounts of Viking-Age Arab travellers such as Ibn Fadlān (though with appropriate caution as to how sure we can be of identifying the Rūs — see above) then the connections are strengthened. We will now review these sources in more detail.

From the Old Norse prose corpus, the sagas of Icelanders contain much of interest. In *Laxdæla saga* (chaps 12–13; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 22–28; Kunz 2000a, 287–88), a married man purchases an enslaved woman to share his bed as a concubine, while in *Vatnsdæla saga* (chap. 37; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 97–100; Wawn 2000, 247) another married man clearly has a formalized sexual relationship with a concubine, who later bears his child. In *Njáls saga* (chap. 98; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 248–52; Cook 2001, 169) the earlier extramarital affair of the titular character is openly acknowledged in front of his wife, here again involving a child of that union. These descriptions are clear but their infrequency supports Jochens's (1980, 386; 1995, 173) suggestion that these stories may reflect Christian moral standards. By the time the sagas were committed to writing, the Church had introduced a number of reforms that included the institutionalization of monogamous marriage and the explicit suppression of both polygyny and concubinage (Karras 1990, 141–42). Of course the existence of large numbers of early Christian laws prohibiting these practices, together with extramarital relationships, implies that they were prevalent in pre-Christian society and also continued after the conversion (Jochens 1980, 381; 1995, 36–42). This is further reinforced by the fact that the later 'Contemporary Sagas', which describe events taking place in Iceland at the time of their composition during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, make frequent reference to concubinage.

The kings' sagas, as well as observations by travellers and missionaries, also suggest that both polygyny and concubinage were practised by Viking-Age Scandinavian elites. High-status men were particularly well placed to have multiple partners, as demonstrated for example in *Haralds saga hins hárfagra* (chap. 21; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 118–20; Finlay & Faulkes 2011, 69). A section beginning with the simple statement that 'Haraldr konungr átti margar konur' (King Haraldr had many wives), then goes on to name three of them. It is further specified that one of his marriages brought with it the stipulation 'at hann léti þá af níu konum sínum' (that he put away nine of his wives). A skaldic verse relates the various districts of Norway that these women came from, and earlier

chapters (e.g. chap. 20) make it clear that he had concubines in addition to his wives. In *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (chap. 33; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 137; Finlay & Faulkes 2015, 66), there is also a brief mention of the king taking a second wife.

A similar picture emerges from the writings of foreign observers. Polygyny and concubinage are very clearly recorded among the Rūs by tenth-century Arab commentators such as Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān and ibn Miskawayh (Montgomery 2015, 253; Lunde & Stone 2012, 151). In Ibn Faḍlān's account, not only do the Rūs themselves have multiple wives and slaves to serve their sexual needs but so do even the wooden idols to which they make offerings, and the Rūs ruler is said to have forty concubines (chaps 76, 77, 89; Montgomery 2015, 243–45, 253).

Writing around 1070 CE, the cleric Adam of Bremen noted similar practices in Sweden, where 'quisque secundum facultatem suarum virium duas aut tres et amplius simul habet; divites et principes absque numero' (a man according to his means has two or three or more wives at one time, rich men and princes an unlimited number) (IV.21; Schmeidler 1917, 251; Tschan 1959, 203). Even in his own time, we see something similar in Adam's writing on the eleventh-century Danish king Sveinn Ástríðarson, who was already under church censure for marrying his own cousin. Having yielded to the archbishop's demands, 'mox ut consobrinam a se dimisit, alias itemque alias uxores et concubinas assumpsit' (soon after he had put aside his cousin he took to himself other wives and concubines, and again still others) (III.12; Schmeidler 1917, 153; Tschan 1959, 123).

While the sagas and the accounts of contemporaneous observers must be treated with caution, it is striking that polygyny and concubinage are recorded in multiple sources, written by different authors at different times, and in widely varying cultural contexts. When viewed collectively, a solid case can be made for these descriptions as a genuine reflection of Viking-Age social behaviours.

Despite what seems to be good evidence for the practices of polygyny and concubinage, however, it must be acknowledged that aspects of them remain uncertain (Clover 1988). One issue that is unclear, for example, is the status of a concubine relative to a wife (see discussion in Raffield and others 2017). Several sources, including medieval law codes, indicate that a concubine might have been considered as possessing the same status as a slave (Dennis and others 2000, 5; Karras 1988, 73–76). On the other hand, it is possible that many different forms of concubinage were recognized, and that the practice may have functioned within networks of political obligation and allegiance that provided concubines with significant power (Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001, 47–98). While it seems unlikely that contemporaneous sources will ever be able to provide a fully accurate perspective of sexual relationships amongst pre-Christian Scandinavian

societies, the balance of evidence suggests that polygyny and concubinage were not only practised during the Viking Age but ingrained with numerous political and social overtones. We will now consider how they might have influenced personal relationships and social practices.

Men without Women? The Impacts of Polygyny and Concubinage on Social Relationships

Both polygyny and concubinage can have pronounced social impacts, affecting the lives of men and women alike. One of these, which underlies much of the discussion in this paper, is the creation of a skewed 'operational sex ratio' (OSR). The OSR is one of several sex ratios recognized by evolutionary biologists (Emlen & Oring 1977; Kvarnemo & Ahnesjö 1996; Weir and others 2011) and is defined as the ratio of males to females in a population who are available to form sexual relationships at any given time. If the OSR becomes biased, then this drives members of the more numerous sex to compete for access to the opposite sex. As biases in the OSR increase, the competition can become increasingly intensive.

It is important to be clear how the OSR differs from the other sex ratios, the primary sex ratio (PSR), the secondary sex ratio (SSR), and the adult sex ratio (ASR). These are the ratios of males to females at conception, at birth, and during adult life, respectively. Importantly, the OSR need not be the same as any of the other sex ratios. For example, the ASR can be 1:1 but the OSR can still be biased towards one sex. This is because the OSR can be influenced by factors that do not affect the other sex ratios. Polygyny and concubinage are just two practices that act in this respect, as they allow certain men to engage in multiple relationships with women, meaning that other men are left without the chance of finding a partner (see discussion in Henrich and others 2012a; Raffield and others 2017). While a number of scholars have debated the potential influence of skewed sex ratios among Viking-Age societies (e.g. Clover 1988, 168–72; Wicker 1998, 209–13; 2012, 253–56; Jesch 2015, 107–08) it is important to note that none of these studies has examined the potential impacts of biased OSRs, instead focusing on the SSR and the ASR.

In our *Evolution and Human Behavior* paper (Raffield and others 2017) we argued that, during the late Iron Age, the practices of polygyny and concubinage among Scandinavian societies led OSRs to become increasingly biased towards men, which would have led to men being more likely to engage in risky status-elevating and sex-seeking behaviours. In a recent review of the social impacts of polygyny, Henrich and others (2012a, 660–63) have shown that unmarried men

are more likely to commit crimes (both violent and non-violent) and that levels of crime are correlated with levels of polygyny. The percentage of married men in the population was a key variable in determining the rates of crime and social disruption in polygynous societies, resulting in increased rates of theft, rape, murder, kidnapping (especially of women), sexual slavery and prostitution, gender inequality, intra-household conflict, and domestic abuse (Henrich and others 2012a). We proposed that a similar imbalance in late Iron-Age Scandinavian OSRs may have contributed to the first Viking raids, which were undertaken largely by young men seeking portable wealth and opportunities to increase their social status (we also emphasize a number of crucial caveats in relation to generalizing cross-cultural data, discussed at length in Raffield and others 2017).

Of course, the effects of polygyny and concubinage would probably not have manifested solely in foreign raiding and warfare but would also have influenced social relationships and interactions within Scandinavian societies. A number of studies have indicated that polygyny and concubinage can drive male-male competition, resulting in the normative practice of arranged marriage, female seclusion, and brideprice, as well as gender inequality, spousal abuse, domestic violence, and competition among co-wives (Grossbard-Shechtman 1993; Breitman & Schackleford 2004; Henrich and others 2012a).

It has also been suggested that polygynous marriage systems perpetuate and socially legitimize negative attitudes towards women (Henrich and others 2012a, 663). While somewhat paradoxical — logic would seem to suggest that when women are scarce their 'value' and therefore personal power should increase — those men who possess the ability and wealth to acquire multiple wives and concubines can come to see women as symbols of status or commodities to be bought and sold. This can lead to women's behaviour being tightly controlled (Divale & Harris 1976, 526–27; Clover 1988, 71; Hudson and Den Boer 2005, 202–03; Henrich and others 2012a, 657).

One of the ways in which institutionalized polygyny and concubinage can affect social relationships and practices is by influencing the strategies employed by men to gain partners. Because men seek multiple partners and remain in the marriage market even after acquiring a wife, intrasexual competition can result in the age of marriage being driven down for young women, increasing the spousal age gap (Henrich and others 2012a). When comparing highly polygynous countries to those from Western Europe and North America, Henrich and others (2012a, 664) demonstrate that the age difference between brides and their husbands when marrying for the first time is 6.4 years in the former, compared with 5 in the latter. The age gap continues to increase as ageing husbands marry more wives, with competition driving the search for increasingly younger brides.

Among the nineteenth-century Ekiti Yoruba of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, it was common for girls to be betrothed during childhood and married soon after puberty (Caldwell and others 1998, 138). In historical China, it was not unheard of for infant girls to be transferred to and raised by the groom's family (Hudson and Den Boer 2005, 204), allowing families to exclude potential competitors and thus ensure the isolation and 'protection' of the future bride.

To the best of our knowledge, pre-marital bridal transfers are not described in Viking-Age sources, but later medieval sagas do record a number of instances of girls being engaged or married at a young age, as well as agreements taking place in which families promise their daughters to men without the legal ties of a formal engagement. In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* for instance, Helga is promised to Gunnlaugr for three years prior to him travelling to Norway (chap. 5; Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938; Attwood 2000, 570). Additionally, there seems to have been no minimum age restriction on marriage itself. In *Njáls saga*, Þorgerðr is engaged to Þráinn at fourteen (chap. 34; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 87–90; Cook 2001, 55–56), while in *Laxdæla saga* Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is engaged to Þorvaldr at fifteen (chap. 34; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 93–94; Kunz 2000a, 332). In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (chap. 1), Jófríðr is already a widow when she marries Þorsteinn at the age of eighteen (Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 51–52; Attwood 2000, 562). The law did not specify a minimum age for betrothal, although Jochens (1995, 22) argues that if a man were to become engaged to a young woman with physical defects then no final decision had to be made until she reached the age of sixteen, giving her the chance to 'outgrow' them (cf. Dennis and others 2000, 59, 270). If Jochens's hypothesis is correct, it implies that intra-sexual competition may have driven men to speculatively acquire marriage partners at a young age, a practice which it should be noted continued into the Christian period. In Iceland, Ingibjörg Sturludóttir was only thirteen years old when she was married in 1253 (Jochens 1995, 52). While lower life expectancy might have contributed to early betrothals and marriages, specific references to individuals aged under sixteen in a number of the *Grágás* laws implies that such individuals were considered as young, even by the standards of the time.

It has also been suggested that, due to high levels of intra-sexual competition, men in polygynous societies often utilize the connections, advantages, and alliances available to them to obtain partners. These can include financial and reciprocal bargains (Henrich and others 2012a, 663). High-status men, for example, take advantage of their social position to gain access to women. Betzig (1995, 186, 191) has argued that this was the case in medieval Europe, where noblemen had sexual access to numerous women, both within and outside of the

household. In some cases, a nobleman's wives and concubines may have included the daughters of his vassals. Such behaviour would have emphasized asymmetrical relationships between elites and the wider populace (Dickemann 1979b, 325) and in some cases might have represented an intentional display of power. We see similar behaviour in the Icelandic sagas. Jochens (1991, 355), for example, notes that in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (chap. 1; Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, 291–94; Durrenburger & Durrenburger 1996, 43), a chieftain named Þorbjǫrn took the daughters and female relatives of other men, keeping them for a while before sending them home. Similar behaviour by a Hebridean Viking is recorded in *Flóamanna saga* (chap. 15; Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, 258–60), and by Hákon jarl (Earl Hákon) in chapter 45 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 290–01; Finlay & Faulkes 2011, 180). In all three cases it is clear that the chieftains were perceived to be abusing their authority and in *Flóamanna saga* the women's families dared not intervene (Jochens 1991, 366). It is also possible, however, that lower class families might have offered their daughters as concubines to elite men in the hope of social advancement, as will be discussed below.

The effects of polygyny and concubinage on the OSR have been found to be more pronounced in stratified societies than in egalitarian ones (Henrich and others 2012a, 659–60). This is because the relationship between male power and the potential to attract or obtain numerous wives and concubines becomes stronger with social stratification. These practices seem to have reached their peak among early states and empires, as in China, Aztec Mexico, and pharaonic Egypt (Betzig 1995, 193). As we have argued elsewhere (Raffield and others 2017, 5–6), we suspect that increasing social stratification in Scandinavia during the late Iron Age would have led to an intensification of both polygyny and concubinage among the elite. While on one hand this would have been driven by the increasing wealth and social status of the aristocracy, evolutionary theory and ethnographic evidence indicate that, in some cases, women's reproductive strategies can be motivated by preference for partners displaying ambition, success, and social status (Dickemann 1979a, 166, 1979b, 323; Huber and others 2011, 350; Henrich and others 2012a, 658). This in turn predicts that when a socially stratified society allows polygyny and concubinage women will often seek to move up social hierarchies. Thus, concubinage may have served as a means of social mobility for lower-status families if they were willing to gamble on the future formalization of a relationship or the production of offspring between their daughters and elite men. Jochens (1987, 335) has argued that this explains why, in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (chap. 8; Blake 1962, 9–10), a father whose daughter conceives a child with King Haraldr of Denmark looked favourably on the

pregnancy. The ability of rulers to attract numerous wives and concubines, as in *Haralds saga hins hárfagra* (chap. 21; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 118–20; Finlay & Faulkes 2011, 69), also supports this suggestion.

For those men who did not have the advantage of status or wealth, few options might have been available aside from attempting to illicitly court a woman or to abduct her. When individuals are faced with the prospect of not being able to achieve their goals, aggression is a common tactic (Baumeister & Bushmann 2004, 214). In this respect, the most obvious advantage that men might have possessed over women was their strength and familiarity with weapons. As noted by Kress (2002, 82), Skírnir uses bribes and threats in an attempt to force the giantess Gerðr to become Freyr's lover in the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* (v. 23; Dronke 1997, 381). Historical sources such as *The Annals of Ulster* also demonstrate that Viking raiding groups sometimes took large numbers of women as captives, as in the case of a raid on Étar, Ireland, in 821 (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, 277). While many women were undoubtedly sold into slavery (as noted in Ibn Fadlān's observations of the Rūs; Montgomery 2015, 243), Jochens (1991, 375) argues that raiding also functioned as a means of obtaining brides and concubines. This suggestion is worth considering, given that anthropological studies indicate that sex trafficking can be positively associated with the degree of polygyny within a society (Henrich and others 2012b, 16). This correlates with the statement in *Grágás* that a man was entitled to purchase a slave specifically for the purpose of sexual pleasure (Dennis and others 1980, 174). In connection with this, it is worth drawing attention to the enslaved Irish princess Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, who was purchased as a concubine by a man named Hoskuldr (chap. 12; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 22–25; Kunz 2000a, 287–88). Additionally, DNA work carried out in Iceland by Agnar Helgason and others (2000) suggests that the Viking-Age female population there was dominated by 'Celtic' women, likely from the British Isles. This result needs to be treated with caution, because the data for this study were obtained from the contemporary population of Iceland rather than from Viking-Age skeletons, but Agnar Helgason and others' results nevertheless raise an interesting possibility. *If* their hypothesis is correct, then large numbers of women might have been brought to Iceland in order to become wives or concubines. While some of these relationships might have been consensual, evidence for a marked gender imbalance during the early settlement period may indicate that many of these women were forcibly taken during Viking raids (see discussion in Clover 1988; Raffield and others 2017).

Seclusion, Arranged Marriage, and Brideprice

Attempts by men to control women's behaviour can arise due to the increased mate competition resulting from male-biased OSRs. Several studies have noted that it is not uncommon for men living in polygynous societies to 'guard' women in order to prevent unwanted access by other men (Henrich and others 2012a, 665; Schacht and Bulgerhoff Mulder 2015, 2). This is achieved through the suppression of women's freedoms and male domination of households, resulting in practices such as female seclusion, arranged marriage, and brideprice.

The seclusion of women can take many forms, ranging from the veiling practised among certain religious communities to the more physical means employed among the large harems of early despotic states (Barry 1981, 50; Betzig 1982, 216). While it has recently been argued that seclusion was not practised in Viking-Age Scandinavia (Ljungqvist 2015, 2), there is some tentative literary evidence to suggest that it did occur, with Jochens (1991, 367; 1995, 80) highlighting the possible segregation of women's quarters and the weaving room within households and the limiting of men's access to these areas. If this was the case, secluding women may have been seen as justified by the belief that women were unable to defend themselves against men's advances (Jochens 1991, 367). If male-biased OSRs were prevalent among Scandinavian societies, then it is not surprising that guardians might have taken measures to prevent contact between their female charges and male outsiders. In her discussion of the 'illicit love visit', Jochens (1991, 367) highlights a number of sagas in which husbands and parents attempt (often unsuccessfully) to closet their wives and daughters, including *Kormáks saga*, in which Steingerðr's father locks his daughter in the pantry in order to prevent contact with Kormákr (chap. 5; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 217–22; Hollander 1949, 21). In some cases these episodes degenerated into violence. When Sǫlmundr attempts to abduct Ǫlvir's daughter in *Ljósvetninga saga* (chap. 1; Björn Sigfússon 1940, 3–6), for example, Ǫlvir prevents this by employing a famously strong man named Ófeigr, who manages to recapture her as she is being lifted over a fence (Jochens 1991, 367). In *Vatnsdæla saga*, tensions arising from Hrolleifr's undesired visits to Hróðný necessitate Hrolleifr employing a slave for added protection, with events culminating in Hróðný's family attempting to kill him (chap. 19; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 52–55; Wawn 2000, 219). In other instances, saga evidence indicates that women were abducted or forced into sexual acts against their will (see discussion in Ljungqvist 2015). Though of course it is also found in other circumstances, this kind of violence is associated with polygyny (Henrich and others 2012a, 660–63), and the threat presented by predatory men may have

contributed to the perceived need for male guardians to seclude the women under their charge.

Arranged marriages and the institutionalization of bridewealth payments represent additional means by which men control the choices and actions of female relatives. While arranged marriage is of course not unique to polygynous societies, this practice nonetheless can serve to consolidate systems of male dominance while ensuring mutually beneficial marriage contracts between family units (Barry 1981, 49).

Saga evidence suggests that arranged marriage was widely practised in Viking-Age Scandinavia and that it often involved the exchange of property as part of the betrothal and marriage process (see *Gísla saga Súrssonar* [chap. 1; Bragi Halldórsson and others 1987, 852; Regal 2000, 500–01] and *Njáls saga* [chap. 6; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 20–23; Cook 2001, 13–14], among others). This suggestion is supported by early Icelandic and Norwegian laws, which attest to a number of payments made by the groom's family prior to and following the marriage (e.g. Dennis and others 1980). The basic payment was the *mundr*, agreed at the time of engagement and stipulated by Icelandic law to be a minimum of one mark and in Norway to be 50 per cent higher at twelve ounces (Jochens 1995, 26). The payment of bridewealth is further reflected in *Bandamanna saga* (chap. 9; Magerøy 1981, 24; Ellison 2000, 484), in which Gellir stated that none of his daughters were married because no man had yet presented himself who was sufficiently rich or accomplished. It is possible, as noted, that this need to obtain wealth for brideprice payments may have been partially responsible for the initial Viking raids (see Simek 2004; Barrett 2008; Sindbæk 2011; Raffield and others 2017), a suggestion supported by the documentation of similar behaviours in anthropological studies (e.g. Fleisher 1999; Fleisher & Holloway 2004; Boyden 2007).

There is reason to think that the institution of arranged marriage would have served to cement networks of allegiance and obligation in Viking-Age Scandinavia. Evidence of the use of marriage as a diplomatic bargaining tool can be seen in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (chap. 5; Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 13–16; Jones 2009, 26), in which Hersteinn seeks out Gunnarr and marries his daughter in order to ensure support in an upcoming feud. Similarly, marriages could be used to end feuding between families. In *Njáls saga* (chap. 159; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 462–64; Cook 2001, 310), for example, Flosi gives his niece in marriage to Kári to when seeking to reconcile following their feuding (Karras 2003, 483; Bayerschmidt & Hollander 1998, 355). This implies that a woman may have been seen by male family members as a potentially valuable pawn in inter-family politics, to be bartered with or without her permission.

Given that prospective brides were often not consulted during marriage negotiations, it is not surprising that women might have resisted seclusion and arranged marriages. One of the ways in which they could do so was through extramarital liaisons (Henrich and others 2012a, 658). This may have provided another pretext for the potential seclusion of women in Viking-Age societies. While serving to protect women from the potentially violent actions of other men, as noted above, it could have also served to prevent them from absconding with undesirable suitors or illicit lovers.

In Viking-Age Scandinavia, women who exercised independence in matters of their marital and sexual relationships were potentially troublesome for male guardians who might have wished to barter them in marriage contracts. Because a woman who entered into an unarranged relationship denied her family a brideprice, this limited or prevented her use in family diplomacy. This might explain why such women were not regarded as legal wives but instead as having the same status as a concubine (Jochens 1995, 24; Dennis and others 2000, 5). This attitude is reflected in a legal disagreement described in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*, in which Ásgerðr's inheritance claim was disputed by her half-sister's husband, who stated that her mother had not been legally married to her father but had instead been abducted: 'var móðir hennar hernumin ok tekin síðan frillutaki ok ekki at frænda ráð ok flutt land af landi' (her mother was captured and made a concubine without her kinsmen's approval, and taken from one country to another: chap. 57; Bjarni Einarsson 2003, 88; Scudder 2000, 95–97). Despite the phrasing, she actually seems to have run off with Ásgerðr's father without her brother's permission (Karras 1990, 153).

It is clear from early Scandinavian law codes that measures were taken to prevent extramarital relationships. The *Grágás* laws, for example, prescribed a range of penalties from the payment of fines to outlawry for sexual crimes ranging from kissing to impregnating a woman (Dennis and others 2000, 69, 72). Significantly for present purposes, rather than being seen as crimes against the woman in question, these actions were perceived as crimes against the woman's male kin (Ljungqvist 2015, 2). It was these men who prosecuted the offender in the law courts, and to whom fines were paid in recompense for the woman's honour (Dennis and others 2000, 70). The *Grágás* laws indicate that male guardians possessed the right to exact more extreme punishments, if they so wished. For example, the laws allowed a man who caught another male in bed with his wife, daughter, mother, sister, foster daughter, or foster mother to kill the offender (Dennis and others 1980, 154). In the case of women who became pregnant while unmarried, Icelandic law stated that male relatives were legally entitled to apply 'force' (providing this left no lasting injuries or visible marks;

Dennis and others 2000, 79) in order to ascertain the identity of the father, against whom they could file a lawsuit to ensure provision for the mother and child (Jacobsen 1982, 74).

Interestingly, women who engaged in illicit relationships largely escaped legal punishment. This may be because they were still considered to be of potential use in family politics (Jochens 1980, 381; Jochens 1995, 168). The *Grágás* laws again can shed light on this, as in the provision whereby an abducted woman cannot transfer any claims to property or press any suits until the general assembly has prosecuted her abduction (Dennis and others 2000, 78). Depending on how literally one takes the term, this effectively prevents any woman who runs away with a man from acting in a legal capacity.

Before continuing, it is important to acknowledge that the prevalence of arranged marriage, brideprice, and female seclusion varies within societies. Dickemann (1979b, 325), for example, has suggested that these customs tend to reach their greatest intensity at the top of social hierarchies. Similarly, citing an example of female seclusion in Southern India, Miller (1982, 782) notes that while the seclusion of women is formally practised at certain stages in the life cycle, their confinement in the home is practised only by a few elite groups. The increased prevalence of these behaviours might be explained by the possibility that high-status men expend more effort and resources on regulating women's sexuality. It seems likely that this is to prevent the production of illegitimate offspring who might possess a claim to inheritance or power. As Dickemann (1979b, 325) points out, this measure of control over elite women's lives is contrasted with that at the bottom of social hierarchies, where women experience greater freedom of choice, promiscuity, and economic, physical, and social independence. It is also possible that going through various stages of life conferred a number of freedoms on women, providing a possible explanation for why exceptional women noted in the sagas are often widows. Examples include Auðr the Deep Minded, who features in *Laxdæla saga* (chaps 3–5; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 5–6; Kunz 2000a, 277–79). The daughter of a Norse chieftain and wife to the king of Dublin, Auðr had a ship built upon her husband's death and moved her entire household to Iceland where she claimed substantial tracts of land. Once no longer under the control of their male guardians or husbands, or perhaps once no longer able to bear children, these women ceased to pose a threat to family stability and inter-family politics. This likely provided them with greater freedom to exercise their own power.

Gender Roles

The discussion thus far has outlined what can only be described as a number of unpleasant prospects for Viking-Age women. At the same time, the practices of female seclusion, arranged marriage, and institutionalized brideprice represent just some of the social impacts of polygyny and concubinage among Scandinavian societies. Attempts to control the agency of women are also reflected in the way that gender roles were perceived during the period. It is not surprising that these nominally placed men in a dominant role in all walks of life. In Viking-Age Scandinavia, the activities that defined the roles of men and women seem to have formed two largely discrete spheres (Jochens 1995, 99; Gräslund 2001, 90). Activities defining the male world included warfare, agriculture, hunting, fishing, politics, trade, manufacture, law, and travel (Clover 1993, 3). In contrast, the woman's world and power seems to have lain primarily within the boundaries of the farm, where she was responsible for the economic, social, and ritual life of the household (Clover 1993, 2; Kristoffersen 2004). While this cannot be taken as a fully accurate representation of daily life for men or women (see discussion in Price 2002; Back-Danielsson 2007), the available evidence does indicate that a woman's capacity to act in the public sphere was limited. While a woman could attend the *Alþingi*, for example, she had to sit as a general member of the public 'outside of the benches' (Borovsky 1999, 12; Dennis and others 2000, 189). She also could not act as a juror, and could only initiate a prosecution in a few instances (Jochens 1995, 114). Similarly, although a woman could participate in a blood-feud by acting as a 'man' to collect *wergild*, the *Grágás* laws stipulate that she could only do so if she was the daughter of a sonless, brotherless, and fatherless man (Dennis and others 1980, 181; Borovsky 1999, 13). These distinctions imply that Scandinavian attitudes towards gender roles nominally served to promote the power of men.

The subordination of women likely would have been reinforced in other ways, too. It has been suggested that the abuse of female slaves for sexual satisfaction would have exemplified the construction and maintenance of gender inequality within patriarchal systems of power (Wyatt 2009, 40). In Ibn Faḍlān's description of the Rūs, it is clear that the enslaved women accompanying the Rūs merchants were to be sold primarily as sexual objects. He singles out their beauty and youth as relevant qualities and also explicitly describes their repeated sexual exploitation at the hands of slave dealers (Montgomery 2015, 243).

The imbalance in gendered power presented here, however, should not be overstated. As we noted in the introduction to this paper, literary sources feature a number of episodes in which women exercise considerable power, especially

within the homestead, through their ability to influence inter-familial politics and feuding. These are the 'strong women' of the sagas (e.g. Thomas 1946; Clover 1988, 1993; Jochens 1995; Borovsky 1999; Norrman 2000; Anderson & Swenson 2002; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008). Examples of these women include Hildigunnr, who in *Njál's saga* (chap. 116; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 289–93; Cook 2001, 194–95) incites Flosi to avenge the killing of her husband. In *Laxdæla saga* (chap. 53; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 161–63; Kunz 2000a, 377–78) Þorgerðr similarly shames her sons into avenging the killing of their brother. There is also archaeological evidence that suggests some women participated in traditionally 'male' activities such as travel and trade, with Stalsberg (2001) hypothesizing that burials of women accompanied by weighing scales in eastern Europe may indicate that they conducted trade among the Rūs. Women likely also performed important roles in the large Viking 'armies' operating in Western Europe, as well as those groups that established colonies in the British Isles and elsewhere (Kershaw 2013; Raffield 2016, 314–19), and a handful of historical sources such as the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* indicate that some women managed to acquire significant martial power (chap. 36; Todd 1867, 41).

In other instances, it is clear that some women simply disregarded the nominal power of men in order to assert their agency. One of the most notable such individuals is 'Breeches-Auðr' of *Laxdæla saga* (chap. 35; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 95–100; Kunz 2000a, 335), who attacks her husband Þórðr after he announces his decision to divorce her. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (chap. 32; Bragi Halldórsson and others 1987, 890–91; Regal 2000, 548), we see another woman by the name of Auðr strike a bounty hunter who came to her house seeking information on her outlaw husband Gísli. She later fights alongside her husband against his would-be killers. While it is of course impossible to estimate the extent to which these individuals were representative of women living in Old Norse society, Clover (1993, 2) suggests that these women should be considered as exceptional, and that it is for this very reason that they were distinctly admired by saga writers.

Similarly, while the available evidence indicates that men sought to regulate women's sexual behaviour literary sources again hint that at least some women exercised a considerable degree of sexual freedom. In Viking-Age Iceland, adultery was not grounds for divorce (Jacobsen 1982) and several sagas describe adulterous affairs that, though disapproved of, go unpunished even when discovered. *Eyrbyggja saga* (chap. 47; Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 132–35; Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1989, 125–27), *Grettis saga* (chaps 88, 91; Örnólfur Thorsson 1994, 211–15, 219–21; Byock 2009, 228–31, 235–37) and perhaps *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (chap. 9; Bragi Halldórsson and others 1987,

859–60; Regal 2000, 509–11), for example, all describe married women taking lovers, while in *Ljósvetninga saga* (chaps 12–13 [22–23]; Björn Sigfússon 1940, 61–73) a young woman named Friðgerðr has relationships with several young men and later becomes pregnant by one of them (Jochens 1995, 34). Further suggestions of women's sexual freedom can be found in the Eddic insult-poem *Lokasenna*, in which Loki exposes a morass of alleged divine infidelity, including that of the goddess Freyja (sts 17, 20, 26, 30, 36, 40, 52, and 54; Dronke 1997). In this case, Njǫrðr's reply to Loki's accusations of promiscuity among the goddesses is revealing: 'Þat er válítit, | þótt sér varðer vers fái, | hós eða hvárs' (There's little harm | though ladies get themselves a man, | a boy on the side, or both) (st. 33; Dronke 1997, 340). At least in jest, sexual licence may have been considerable even for some women.

Intra-Household Relationships

While women were nominally subject to the limitations imposed on them by men within entrenched systems of power, the evidence presented in the previous section indicates that gender relationships and roles were perhaps not as clear-cut as a cursory reading of the later literary sources would have us believe. In fact, it seems that the roles and agency of women were variable and dynamic, and this becomes even more apparent when we consider gendered relationships and hierarchies of power as they played out against the backdrop of the domestic sphere.

Men in polygynous societies have been shown to often dominate household decisions (Henrich and others 2012a, 663). The reason for this might be that the younger age of brides in polygynous societies prevents women from acquiring sufficient education and experience to resist male authority, while the allocation of material resources among numerous wives can also place co-wives in a subordinate position relative to their husband. This argument applies to some extent to Viking-Age societies, and we can see this when considering the phenomenon of sexual hospitality. Although this practice is not exclusively associated with polygynous households, sexual hospitality represents another means through which men can regulate the sexuality and behaviour of female family members. While this argument initially seems to contradict the suggestion that men seek to prevent others from gaining access to women (cf. Henrich and others 2012a; Schacht and Bulgerhoff Mulder 2015), at certain times it might have been politically useful to grant sexual access to female slaves or even family members. Jochens (1995, 35) notes how in *Hallfreðar saga* (chap. 9; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 177–85), for example, Hallfreðr's companions each 'borrow' a servant woman for the

night during their visit to a shieling in the summer pastures, while in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* (chap. 3; Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991, 345–48) Oddný becomes pregnant by Ívarr, a visitor to the household whom she is designated to serve. Sexual hospitality, in some cases, would have provided useful opportunities to forge and manipulate systems of political allegiance and obligation between families. This is supported in a contemporary context by the findings of a cross-cultural ethnographic study of opposite-sex relationships by Broude and Green (1976). Of forty-three societies who allowed wife-lending, thirteen shared or lent wives for the purposes of hospitality, alliance-forming, or ceremony (Broude & Green 1976, 46).

In other cases, providing favoured followers with women would have served to bind low-status individuals to the elite, creating and enforcing hierarchies of power, obligation, and loyalty (Karras 1992, 300; Wyatt 2009, 140–41). The opportunity to gain not only personal wealth but also access to women may have attracted large numbers of unmarried or lower-status men to the household and service of particular individuals (Karras 1992, 300; Jochens 1995, 35; Raffield and others 2017, 7), providing the elite with the means to maintain power and engage more efficiently in warfare. This reciprocal relationship between a lord and his retainers can be seen in Ibn Fadlān's observations of the Rūs court, in which he recorded that the king's personal retinue of four hundred warriors were each provided with two slave girls (Montgomery 2015, 253). The Viking-Age skaldic poem *Hrafnsmál* or *Haraldskvæði* by Þórbjǫrn hornklofi similarly states that king Haraldr hárfagri rewarded his warriors with 'malmi húnlenzkum | ok mani austrœnu' (malm [gold?] from Hunland and slave-girls from the east lands) (st. 16; Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B 1, 22–25; trans. n.p.).

Men also may have possessed the nominal power to dominate decisions regarding the recognition or killing of children (Jochens 1995, 85). While the extent to which Viking-Age societies practised infanticide has been debated (see Clover 1988; Jochens 1995; Mundal 1988, 1989; Wicker 1998, 2012; Callow 2006; Eriksen 2017), saga evidence indicates it was a relatively common practice. This is supported by numerous medieval Christian law codes, which include laws that prescribe punishments for the killing of children, indicating that this was a practice that persisted for some time (see Jochens 1995, 85–93; Mejsholm 2009, 91–102). A number of sagas indicate that a man had the right not to accept a child born of his wife or mistress. In such cases, the child might have been exposed or drowned. In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (chap. 3; Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 55–58; Attwood 2000, 563), for instance, Þórsteinn orders his wife Jófríðr to expose their child if it is a girl, threatening her with his temper should she not undertake the task. Similarly, in *Finnboga saga* (chap. 2; Jóhannes

Halldórsson 1959, 254; Kennedy 1997, 222) Ásbjǫrn tells his pregnant wife that the child should be exposed to the elements regardless of its sex. The tenth-century traveller Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb, furthermore, noted that unwanted children at Hedeby, Jutland, were thrown into the sea (Lunde & Stone 2012, 163).

It is worth noting that there is evidence that male domination was also not absolute in relation to these decisions. This can be seen in the episode of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (chap. 3) already referred to, in which Jófríðr gives birth to a baby girl while Þórsteinn is away at the *Alþingi*. Instead of exposing the child as instructed, she pays her shepherd to bear the child away to safety (Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, 55–58; Attwood 2000, 564). Neither Þórsteinn's position as head of the household nor his threats can induce his wife to kill their child, while his absence compounds his inability to ensure that his commands are carried out.

Numerous studies have highlighted the key role that women played in the management of the Viking-Age household and farm (Jochens 1995, 116–17; Gräslund 2001, 99), and the frequency with which men travelled, engaged in warfare, and died abroad during the Viking Age is argued to have contributed to this (Dommasnes 1982, 81; 1991, 67). Although the discussion above indicates that some women sought to usurp the nominal authority of men, maintaining a balance of power within the household probably would have brought significant benefits. As noted by Stalsberg (2001, 74–76), the economic output of the farm or household was less vulnerable if more than one individual was involved in its day-to-day management and engaged in activities such as trade. The status and power of women in managing the farm and the household is suggested to be reflected in the bunches of keys worn by women and found in numerous graves across Scandinavia (Borovsky 1999, 15–16), with Kristoffersen (2004) suggesting that these were just one set of objects that emphasized the status and role of the 'lady of the house'. The sagas similarly indicate that it was not unusual for women to play an extensive role in managing the economy of the farm. In *Njáls saga*, for example (chap. 36; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 92–96; Cook 2001, 60–61), Bergþóra hires Atli as a servant while Njáll is away at Þórólfsfell, stating that she has equal authority in the hiring of help on the farm. This finds agreement with the inscription on the eleventh-century Odendisa runestone (Vs 24) from Hassmyra in Västmanland, Sweden, raised by a man named Holmgautr in memory of his wife, Óðindísa, who is praised for her efficiency in managing the estate (Gräslund 2001, 84). Although it is difficult to identify exactly how male-female power relationships were structured with regard to the running of the household and farm, it is clear that at least some women carried significant influence.

There were other ways in which women could assert dominance within the home, too, and it is through these that the nominal control over their behaviour and sexuality might have been subverted. Anthropological studies have shown that, in societies featuring male-biased OSRs, women are able to exert power by manipulating their husband's insecurities. In a study of polygynous Mormon relationships, Jankowiak (2008, 176) notes that because polygynous men constantly compete for partners, they often fear that their wives will withdraw from them emotionally and physically or that they will seek out another partner. We see similar processes operating in various sagas, while the ease with which women could obtain a divorce in the pre-Christian period provided them with additional power and leverage (Jochens 1995, 55). In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (chap. 9; Bragi Halldórsson and others 1987, 859–60; Regal 2000, 510–11), for example, Ásgerðr threatens her husband Þorkell with divorce when he objects to her adultery, while in *Grænlendinga saga* (chap. 8; Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 264–67; Kunz 2000b, 650) Freydis threatens her husband Þórvaldr with divorce if he does not avenge her of a fictitious assault. As noted above, there are also numerous instances in the sagas where women shame or incite their menfolk to participate in violence (Borovsky 1999, 15–16) and their words clearly carry weight. This is often achieved by questioning or insulting men's masculinity — the very trait that provided them with power. The ability of women to exert influence in this way is argued by Clover (1988, 172–78) to reflect their numerical scarcity in Icelandic society. Despite being largely powerless in public according to the social conventions and laws of society, the effects of male-biased OSRs may have allowed some women to channel power through their personal relationships. This may have increased with time, as the significant age gaps that would have existed between wives and their husbands mean that women might have obtained increasing power and independence as their husbands grew older, became infirm, and eventually died. As we have seen above, this may explain why exceptional women noted in the sagas are often widows.

While Henrich and others (2012a) suggest that males dominate household decisions within polygynous societies, the leading role that women could play in the management of homesteads and estates provided them with opportunities to obtain and manage their power, creating a space that acted as a legitimate stage for performances that would facilitate this (Borovsky 1999, 18; Eriksen 2015, 168). As Gräslund (2001, 99) notes, the farmhouse or hall acted as an area where the public sphere mingled with the private, forming a zone where social boundaries would dissolve. The situation of women in a prominent social position within this particular locale would have provided them with

the capability to exert a considerable influence. It seems, therefore, that the household itself was an environment in which nominal male power could be eroded by female expertise and experience.

Intra-Household Conflict, Neglect, and Oppression

It must be considered, however, how power would be distributed between co-wives living within polygynous households. If a senior wife were responsible for the management of the household itself, for example, how would this have affected the influence of other wives? Furthermore, how would the addition of new wives have disrupted co-wife hierarchies and duties within the household? The extent to which co-operation or conflict prevailed likely would have had important implications for those living within polygynous households.

Henrich and others (2012a, 665) suggest that polygyny often leads to co-wife competition and domestic abuse, as well as to reduced relatedness and paternal certainty within households. This can have detrimental effects on intra-household relationships, including not only those between co-wives but also those between formal wives, concubines, and children. This hypothesis finds support in a number of anthropological studies of contemporary polygynous households. Jankowiak and others (2005), for example, note that co-wife conflict was endemic among sixty-nine non-sororal polygynous societies investigated as part of a survey of co-wife conflict and cooperation. They found that this conflict was largely due to co-wives' desire for intimacy with their husbands and their interest in reproduction. In a later study, Jankowiak (2008, 174–75) noted that co-wives competed to monopolize their husband's affection in order to become the favourite wife, thereby guaranteeing a greater share of attention and material wealth for themselves and their own children. In a series of interviews with Bedouin-Arab co-wives, Al-Krenawi and Graham (1999, 505) found that it is the most junior wife within a polygynous relationship who tends to experience preferential treatment, economic, and emotional support from the husband. This advantage, however, can be offset by inexperience, as more senior wives can benefit from having accomplished culturally prescribed achievements or by giving birth to children (Madhavan 2002, 82). This provides senior wives with power that can be mobilized in order to maintain their influence and personal freedoms.

Co-wife conflict is not inevitable, however, and can be avoided if equality is maintained within the household. Jankowiak and others (2005, 81) note that many co-wives prefer to cooperate pragmatically while maintaining a respectful distance, while Mormons engaging in polygynous marriages strive to obtain

'harmonious love' (Jankowiak 2008, 177) — a notion that promotes selflessness, respect, and empathy. At the same time, this state of affairs is vulnerable to being hijacked by personal, romantic, or sexual desires, and co-wives often carefully assess their husband's actions for signs of favouritism. Unspoken agreement to remain equal often exists between co-wives (Madhavan 2002, 71) but there is a potential for jealousy and rivalry to form if one or more parties perceive this agreement to be broken. This may explain why so much acrimony surrounds the time that a polygynous husband spends with each of his wives. Within the Bedouin-Arab household considered by Al-Krenawi and Graham (1999), for example, jealousy was sometimes ignited by acts such as the husband's choice to spend the night with one wife over the others. In a study of abusive, polygynous relationships in America, Hassouneh-Phillips (2001, 745) documents the violent conflict that can result from this, with interviewees describing physical confrontations between wives in which husbands refused to intervene.

Because so many of the sagas present marriages as monogamous, it is difficult to confidently identify co-wife conflict within Viking-Age households. A possible insight into intra-household hierarchies and conflict, however, is provided when Þorgrímr's wife orders the child born by his concubine to be exposed in *Vatnsdæla saga* (chap. 37; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, 97–100; Wawn 2000, 247). Although no reason is given for the order, Þorgrímr's wife may have felt that the child would compromise her own status within the household. This incident might also be taken to suggest that concubines were of low social status and that they and their children, especially if slave-born, were potentially at the mercy of jealous wives. As Auður Magnúsdóttir (2001, 99–128; 2008, 45–47) has noted, however, it is possible that numerous grades of concubine existed, meaning that some concubines might have possessed high status even if their position were officially less secure than that of a legal wife.

Another potential impact of polygyny within the household is increased spousal violence and homicide (Henrich and others 2012a, 665). Al-Krenawi and Lev-Weisel (2002) have noted a link between polygyny and wife-abuse among Arab-Bedouin families, while other studies have identified increased rates of violence against women living in polygynous households in countries ranging from Uganda to South Africa and North America (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001; Jewkes and others 2002; Karamagi and others 2006). The reasons for this are manifold but include retaliation for real or imagined unfaithfulness or the simple perception that women are the property of men (Al-Krenawi and Lev-Weisel 2002, 154–55). Henrich and others (2012a, 665) also cite the constant threat of mate competition among men and increased prospects of paternal uncertainty as a factor in precipitating violence.

Although few episodes of domestic violence against women are recorded in the saga literature, *Grágás* law specifically cites violence by one spouse against another, amounting to 'major wounds' that penetrate the brain, the body cavity, and the marrow (Jochens 1995, 56; Dennis and others 1980, 221) as grounds for immediate divorce (Dennis and others 2000, 63). While the presence of such laws implies that domestic violence took place, the very severe levels of injury required for an immediate divorce may suggest that lower levels of violence against spouses were socially acceptable. This should not be surprising given the violence sanctioned against women in other cases (such as the use of force to establish the paternity of a child, as noted above). When Þorvaldr slaps Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*, her reply also arguably acknowledges this: 'af hefir þú mik ráðit brekvísi við þik' (by this you have warned me not to pester you: chap. 34; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, 93–94; Kunz 2000a, 332; our translation). Seeking advice on how to repay Þorvaldr, Guðrún is told to make him a shirt with a low neckline. This was considered as clothing suitable for the opposite sex and thus gave her grounds for divorce (Kunz 2000a, 332). The fact that Guðrún evidently could not divorce Þorvaldr for the assault but instead had to seek alternative means perhaps further demonstrates some measure of acceptability of domestic violence.

The above-mentioned incident involving the concubine from *Vatnsdæla saga* is also consistent with another putative effect of polygyny, namely that it can increase the potential for the domestic abuse of children (Henrich and others 2012a). This may result from decreased relatedness, as children find themselves under the care of women who are not their mothers or blood relations. Instead, these women might be co-wives who would potentially wish to discriminate against or even harm the children of their competitors in order to clear the way for their own children's success. On the other hand, while Omariba and Boyle (2007, 532) acknowledge the potential for violence against children within polygynous households, they also emphasize that this is not universal. If co-wives can manage to establish a cooperative rather than competitive relationship then there are in fact positive potential outcomes for children, as they are more likely to be cared for and supervised by a responsible adult at any given time. This is, however, probably the case only in a minority of households, as children are more prone to being mistreated when parental feeling is weak (Daly & Wilson 1980, 279, 281).

While the incident in *Vatnsdæla saga* might represent the only literary evidence for violence against children by non-relations within Viking-Age households, tentative archaeological evidence for infanticide might also suggest that intra-household conflict occurred. The recovery of infant remains from settlements, wetlands, middens, cairn packings, and refuse pits, for example, has been argued to be indicative of the practice (Sjöberg & Marnung 1976; Ritchie 1976–77;

Sælebakke 1986; Wicker 1998; Eriksen 2017). In the runestone inscriptions of central Sweden, it has also been observed that up to six sons might be mentioned from one family, but never more than two daughters, and this too has been claimed as possible evidence of selective female infanticide (Gräslund 1989, 233–40). The extensive legislation to prevent infanticide in medieval law codes (such as the Norwegian *Gulaþing* and *Frostaþing* laws; Larson 1935, 50–51, 226) may represent better evidence of the practice, and perhaps even indicates that it was prevalent.

Another characteristic of polygynous households that deserves consideration is that conflict between spouses and co-wives might increase the possibility of abusive behaviour and violence by children themselves. This is attested to in several studies (Al-Krenawi & Graham 1999; Elbedour and others 2006; Bamgbade & Saloviita 2014). In the polygynous family considered by Al-Krenawi and Graham (1999), not only did the children of various co-wives fight each other, but the male children adopted their abusive father's behaviours in order to terrorize and beat their mothers and sisters. Such behaviour, however, is not attested in the saga literature.

At present, the limitations of the available data make it impossible to fully understand many aspects of intra-household power relations in Viking-Age Scandinavia. While women might have held a significant measure of authority within the household or farm, for example, contemporaneous laws suggest that violence against spouses, co-wives, and children did occur and perhaps even that certain levels of violence were socially sanctioned. The reality of co-wife conflict and abuse of children by non-related females within the household has likely been obscured and under-represented by the sagas' tendency to portray marriage as monogamous, although the order to expose the concubine's child in *Vatnsdæla saga* may provide an insight into this. The potential for intra-house hierarchies raises important questions regarding our perception of notions such as Kristoffersen's (2004) 'lady of the house'. For example, if co-wives competed for power in a manner similar to those observed in anthropological studies, how would this have affected personal relationships and social stability within the household? Similarly, might competition for power between wives and concubines have negatively affected the output of farming and household industry? We acknowledge that given the limitations of the available sources it is difficult to fully theorize the consequences of any such conflict at this time, but the questions are pertinent nonetheless.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we have outlined a new approach to investigating social relationships in Viking-Age Scandinavia, with a particular emphasis on the social consequences of polygyny and concubinage for women and children. As we have discussed in a previous paper (Raffield and others 2017), we believe that the normative practice of polygyny and concubinage may have led to the creation of male-biased OSRs. With the aid of evolutionary theory and comparative ethnographic data, we have suggested that these practices fuelled and legitimized misogynistic social attitudes and customs that upheld systems of male power. These included efforts by men to procure partners at an early age in order to ensure a favourable marriage; the bartering of women in arranged marriage agreements between kin groups; institutionalized bridal purchase; and the physical seclusion of women from interaction with outsiders. Another consequence of this was the potential for increased aggressive behaviour among men as they strove to obtain wives and concubines within an increasingly competitive marriage market.

Although not the specific focus of this paper, the discussion above has demonstrated that an underlying threat of violence permeated nearly every aspect of men's attempted control over women, ranging from socially and legally sanctioned violence against spouses and charges to the bloody feuds that could develop between competing men, or between suitors and a woman's family. We believe that this latent violence may have also materialized in other ways, such as by driving men to engage in overseas raiding in an attempt to secure the resources and status that would have allowed them to marry (Raffield and others 2017). Comparative anthropological evidence has shown such behaviour to be common in societies with male-biased OSRs (Raffield and others 2017, 4–5)

The analysis in this paper in many ways contradicts much of the work on Viking-Age gender relationships and attitudes that has emerged over the last two decades. Instead of indicating a significant degree of social freedom and gendered equality for women, the evidence we have reviewed suggests instead that many Viking-Age Scandinavian women would have faced bleak prospects. It is possible that the focus of previous scholarship upon exceptional women in the literary and historical records — those women who themselves possessed significant social status, power, and wealth — has obscured the position of the majority. However, it is impossible to construct a single model of gendered power that is applicable across Viking-Age Scandinavia; male domination cannot be assumed to have been universally pervasive. Women possessed many tools with which to exert their influence and agency. As Jochens (1995, 31) notes, prior to the Conversion marriage was not a lifelong union and divorce was relatively easy

to obtain. It seems likely that this could be used as a threat against husbands. The death of men in battle and during travel also meant that women would remarry, sometimes multiple times (Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, for example, was married four times; Kunz 2000a), and widowhood might have conferred increased social status, independence, and power upon women. While there are of course numerous limitations to the available data, the number of instances where women shame and abuse men, or act in ways that were not considered socially appropriate, cannot necessarily be taken as purely fictional episodes of the sagas. In our view, these examples must have some basis in reality (see also Clover 1988, 149; Borovsky 1999). Older and widowed women may have exercised more autonomy than those who were younger, who would be closely guarded by their male kin and husbands. Other exceptional women, such as 'breeches Auðr' in *Laxdæla saga*, simply disregarded societal customs in order to act as they wished (Jochens 1995, 62; Kunz 2000a).

That said, we must acknowledge that arguments for gendered egalitarianism among Viking-Age Scandinavian societies, which focus on the ability of some women to inherit, to own property, or to initiate divorce proceedings, in fact reveal nothing about sexual inequality. By focusing on the prospective 'benefits' that were possessed by some Viking-Age women, we are in danger of disregarding the struggles of thousands of others who could not exert agency in these ways. Furthermore, to what extent can the powerful, high-status women of the sagas, or those encountered in the archaeological record (such as in the ninth-century Oseberg ship), be considered representative of the population as a whole? Given that a number of anthropological studies have shown gendered inequality and male control to be greatest among the highest tiers of society (Dickemann 1979a, 1979b), the social attitudes towards women that we discuss in this paper may not have been universally applicable to many of those living in Viking-Age Scandinavia.

Developing a sufficiently nuanced approach to Viking-Age gender relationships presents many challenges, but further progress might be made through combining methods such as those employed here with the further analysis of archaeological material. Although the material reflections of inter-personal relationships are difficult to identify and interpret, a number of regional examples have shown how this could potentially be achieved. In an important comparative study of contemporary burial customs in northern Scotland and the Møre and Romsdal areas of Norway, for example, Norstein (2014) has found dramatic differences in the way the sexes were treated in death. In her study areas Norstein analyses graves across multiple scales, one of which is the subjective assessment of prominent inclusions of weapons and jewellery as respective signals of male and

female sex — an admittedly problematic dichotomy but one at least amenable to some broad-brush patterning. She demonstrates that while in Scotland the proportions of weapon and jewellery burials were roughly equal at around 40 per cent, in her Norwegian sample the weapon graves made up 77 per cent of the total while burials containing jewellery formed only 12 per cent. The data resolution and the uncertainty as to the reliability of artefact-based sexing make firm conclusions difficult but Norstein suggests that this pattern may mean that fewer women received marked burial in Møre and Romsdal. Could this be a sign of relative status, such as would fit our tentative models of social customs? If so, there is a striking contrast between the imbalanced picture from coastal Norway and a Scottish colonial environment with apparently more equal treatment of the sexes in death.

While a great deal remains to be learned about social relationships and attitudes during the Viking Age, we must be clear that in writing this paper we are in no way attempting to rob women of their historical agency. To the contrary, by exposing the potential social conditions that were imposed upon women throughout their lives we seek to raise awareness of the circumstances in which their agency was necessary in order to overcome institutionalized systems of male dominance. Exploring how women resisted male power, and how in doing so they affected gender relationships among Viking-Age Scandinavian societies themselves, allows us to construct a more nuanced understanding of the past. At the same time, we would like to emphasize that the social model outlined in this paper is one that imposed inequality and limitations on people *regardless of their sex*. To imply that it was only women who suffered under the conditions imposed by elite males would be to marginalize the lives of the vast majority of men, at whose expense the elite thrived. As such, we believe that it is more than ever necessary to consider Viking-Age gender relationships as deeply embedded within wider discussions of socio-political power.

The discussion in this paper was informed by both recent and well-established evolutionary anthropological research, which has been influential in allowing us to better conceptualize societal customs within cultures that practise polygyny and concubinage. This approach has demonstrably provided new insights into the potential social processes and customs that prevailed among Scandinavian societies during the Viking Age. The consequences of polygyny and concubinage are exemplified in the complex system of ideologies and legislation that underpinned social actions and relationships, as well as the numerous saga narratives that document the protracted and bitter conflicts that could arise as a result. We anticipate that further cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research of this kind has the potential to generate new and exciting avenues of debate, and we encourage other studies that seek to expand upon the initial conclusions presented here.

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